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# DENNY'S VOCABULARY OF SHAWNEE

from the Journal of  
Ebenezer Denny



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## Preface to the 1999 Edition

The most persistent question surrounding the Shawnee has been the location of their original homeland. By the time they are regularly encountered in history, they were already a scattered and far-flung tribe. The earliest historical sources are at least consistent in placing the Shawnee (spelled Chaouanon in French accounts) in the Ohio river system, either on the Ohio itself or on one of its tributaries such as the Cumberland. But confusion has persisted as to exactly where they were seated.

From the northeast, a Seneca informant told La Salle in 1668 that after a month's travel down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers, one came upon the "Honniasontkeronons and the Chiouanons." Exploring the Mississippi River to the west, Jolliet and Marquette found the mouth of the Ohio in 1673 which "flows from the lands of the East, where dwell the people called Chaouanons in so great numbers that in one district there are as many as 23 villages, and 15 in another, quite near one another. They are not at all warlike, and are the nations whom the Iroquois go so far to seek, and war against without any reason..." In a source of 1728, the Iroquois order the Shawnee refugees in Pennsylvania "back toward ohioh The place from whence you Came" (Hunter 1978).

Today's consensus, resting on the preponderance of historical accounts such as these, is that the Shawnee were originally located along the Upper Ohio River in what is now southern Ohio, and thus may have been the ethnic

group associated with the archaeological Fort Ancient complex. This conclusion cannot be proven at present, though it is a working assumption among many scholars. Any continuity between Fort Ancient archaeological sites and historical settlements was unfortunately broken before the area was ever explored by Europeans, as a consequence of the forces tangentially mentioned in Marquette's statement above.

During the Beaver Wars in the second half of the 1600's, Iroquois war parties inflicted crippling damage upon the original Ohio River tribes: the Franquelin map of 1684 (Hanna 1911) notes four tribes on the Ohio as "destroyed" and their inhabitants are barely or never heard from again. Sources which mention the Shawnee "document a pattern of Iroquois attacks, gaining in intensity" (Callender 1978). By the 1680's and 1690's Shawnee groups fleeing from these attacks ended up far from their original lands: as far east as the Susquehanna and Delaware rivers, as far south as the Savannah, and as far west as the Illinois. Nor did the Shawnee remain very long at these locations, but continued their migrations again as English colonization and American wars pushed tribes farther into the interior of the continent. Unlike their neighbors in the Ohio Valley, however, the Shawnee managed to survive to the present with their culture and language intact.

It has long been known that Shawnee is a member of the Algonquian language family. Earlier this century, Shawnee was placed in a Central Algonquian grouping, in

the belief that the Central Algonquian languages all shared a common ancestor called Proto-Central Algonquian (Miller 1959). But this idea has not stood up to further scrutiny. Though still convenient in a geographical sense, Central Algonquian as a linguistic classification is no longer used. It is now believed that Shawnee and the other Central Algonquian languages all evolved independently from Proto-Algonquian, and did not undergo any shared development.

Three dialects of the language are current in Oklahoma: Absentee, Eastern and Cherokee Shawnee\*. They show little internal differentiation, and it is unclear exactly how these three modern dialects relate to the traditional five-fold divisions of *čalaka*, *kišpoko*, *mekoče*, *pekowi*, and *thawikila*, if indeed they do at all. Callender (1978) offers one synthesis based on historical population movements: namely, that the Absentee Shawnee are *kišpoko*, *pekowi*, and *thawikila*, the Eastern Shawnee are *mekoče*, and the Cherokee Shawnee are *mekoče* and *čalaka*. A thorough review of the numerous historical vocabularies may shed some light on early Shawnee dialectology and linguistic history, but this task remains to be done.

Major Ebenezer Denny (1761-1822) served with the American army on the Pennsylvania-Ohio frontier in the late 1700's, and later became the first mayor of Pittsburgh. Appended to his military journal of the years 1781-1795, published in 1860 by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, are two vocabularies of the Delaware and Shawnee

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\*not the Cherokee language, which is unrelated.

languages, both originally recorded by Denny himself during treaty negotiations at Forts McIntosh and Finney respectively.

Following Denny's account, at the end of summer in 1785 a newly recruited company of soldiers prepared to embark down the Ohio river to sign a treaty with the Indians at the mouth of the Great Miami river in what is now the southwestern corner of Ohio. Colonel Josiah Harmar rather unexpectedly ordered Denny to accompany them. By October 22, 1785 the troops had reached the Miami, and hastily constructed a fort there which was named Fort Finney.

Major Denny subsequently elicited 404 words of Shawnee in January of 1786 while stationed at the fort. About the "Grenadier Squaw" who provided the vocabulary, little is known. Denny mentions that her brother Bohengehalus arrived at Fort Finney on the 21st of December 1785; and that this man was "esteemed one of the greatest warriors now among all the Indians."

The Shawnee were at this time settled along the Miami, having relocated there from the Scioto valley during the American Revolution. At the outbreak of the Revolution they had participated in British-sponsored raids on American frontier settlements; but were compelled to relocate when the Americans retaliated on their own villages (Callender 1978). After the war, the Shawnee were treated by the United States as conquered enemies and forced to turn over their lands to the east of the Great Miami. Like their Iroquoian allies at Fort Stanwix and the Delaware and Wyandot at Fort McIntosh, the Shawnee were begrudgingly forced to accept the terms offered them.

Shawnee is still being spoken today, although recent published work on the language has not been very extensive. The historical sources have been incorporated into a teaching manual in Chrisley (1992); the lion's share of scholarly analysis has been done by Charles Voegelin (1935, 1936, 1938-40, 1954). About 300-400 speakers of Shawnee were known in 1965 (Goddard 1978); more recently Shawnee has been listed among languages spoken by adults but no or very few children (Goddard 1996).

— Claudio R. Salvucci, series ed.